

Prepared Remarks

J. Whyatt Mondesire

President, Philadelphia NAACP

Thank you, Chairman Brady and members of the committee for the opportunity to appear before you this morning.

It is only fitting and proper that we gather here – in Philadelphia City Council Chambers – to discuss impediments to voter enfranchisement. Within these walls many great debates about our City have raged. Some of grand consequence – school funding, neighborhood transformation, how to address the rise in gun violence and some of small consequence – when we pick up the trash or how many roads shall we pave.

No matter the content of those debates – nor really their outcome – what is important is that they were made by representatives of the people. Duly elected and sworn to serve the people. It's important that the people have a voice in this process – that their votes count, and are counted.

At the NAACP, this issue is not new to us.

In the 2003 Mayoral election, seven percent of African-Americans reported some trouble with accessing their polling place. Sadly, this problem is not limited to Philadelphia. Throughout the country there have been reports of:

- Challenges and threats against individual voters at the polls by armed private guards, off-duty law enforcement officers, local creditors, fake poll monitors, and poll workers and managers.
- Signs posted at the polling place warning of penalties for “voter fraud” or “non-citizen” voting, or illegally urging support for a candidate.
- Poll workers “helping” voters fill out their ballots, and instructing them on how to vote.
- Criminal tampering with voter registration rolls and records.
- Flyers and radio ads containing false information about where, when and how to vote, voter eligibility, and the false threat of penalties.

Sadly, too often nothing is done by the federal government to mitigate these impediments to voting. It is often up to the local and national media, as well as advocacy groups, to scramble to try to undo the damage. While it is difficult to conclusively demonstrate that any specific misdeed or pattern of behavior had an impact on an election, it is the position of the NAACP that if even one lawful voter was deceived or intimidated and therefore did not cast a legitimate vote, that is one too many and the federal government must act.

Chairman Brady and members of the Committee, you can and must lead the way on this issue by taking a few – but important – steps:

- 1) Support S.453, a bill introduced by Senators Obama, Schumer and others to address the Prevention of Deceptive Practices and Voter Intimidation in Federal Elections
- 2) Ask tough questions about the purging of voter lists in an often random and arbitrary way by election officials across the country
- 3) Give serious consideration to the idea of same day registration
- 4) And last – but certainly not least – file an amicus brief with the Supreme Court in opposition to Voter ID's as they consider *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* and *Indiana Democratic Party v. Rokita*

Requiring Voter Identification at the polls places an unfair and onerous burden on prospective voters that will ultimately discourage people from participating in the democratic process.

There are several fundamental problems with the concept of voter of identification. First, it is nearly impossible to tie voter identification to a universal piece of identification. If you accept a Driver's license, what about those that don't drive – the elderly, the poor, those who take public transportation? If you've lost your license, you've lost your right to vote? That's insane. The American Association of People with Disabilities reports that nearly 3 million disabled people do not have ANY form of government identification.

Some would like us to consider a state-issued voter identification? The insanity continues. What about the cost? Charging what is effectively a poll tax that would provide a further hardship to the poor? How would we issue this identification? Another burden on the voter and a further impediment to their right to vote.

Some voter identification laws accept phone bills, electric bills, leases and other pieces of paper. These are the most absurd of all. A person's right to vote should not depend on whether or not they have a phone, have electrical service, or rent there home.

Mr. Chairman, voter identification sounds simple – and innocent – enough. Even people who go to Blockbuster have to show ID, but when you are talking about a hardship that may dissuade ONE person from exercising their right to vote, that is one far too many.

I very much appreciate your leadership on this issue and the opportunity to discuss these issues with you today. The NAACP of Philadelphia will always be a stalwart proponent for the enfranchisement of all voters and are grateful for your leadership on these issues in the Congress.

I'm happy to take any questions you may have.